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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that verified the relationship between the professional isolation of school principals and their performance at work. A survey of all principals in a suburban area of Quebec (n=166) elicited a 70 percent response rate. The principals completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Self-Appraisal Instrument for Community College Administrators. Findings indicate a negative, significant correlation between isolation and performance. The findings could be due to the high proportion of males in the sample; men usually keep their feelings to themselves. Other explanations are that professional isolation generates dissatisfaction toward the work environment, which in turn affects performance; or that professional isolation often results in a lack of support, information, and feedback. One table and one figure are included. (Contains 34 references.) (LMI)

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Relationship between professional isolation of
school principals and their performance at work¹

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Summary.- This paper presents a study that verified the relationship between professional isolation of school principals and their performance at work. One hundred and fourteen principals of a suburban area of the province of Quebec were administered French versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale and Self-Appraisal Instrument for Community College Administrators. The results indicate, as expected, a negative and significant correlation between isolation and performance. Implications of these results for future research on principals' professional isolation are discussed.

Introduction

Educational organizations are facing many challenges. They must enhance the quality of their services, ensure that all children are learning, reduce drop out rates and encourage the completion of degrees. The situation calls for improvement and leadership. A large body of studies (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger, & Leithwood, 1994; Sweeney, 1982) highlights the primary role of school leaders on student outcomes in excellent American schools. Moreover, the situation in which principals find themselves can be seen as a barrier to the development of their leadership. They must face challenges while working in conditions that sometimes make success hard to achieve. One of these conditions lies in the lack of development of their informal networks of communication. These networks represent the "central nervous system driving the collective thought processes, actions, and reactions" (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993 p. 104) of organizations. They can play a key role in organizational functioning (Hellweg, 1983). Studies like the ones performed by Garber (1991), Pépin (1986), Johnson and Licata

(1983) and Licata and Hack (1980) illustrate the lack of development of informal networks of principals. The nature of their working conditions (e.g., distance between schools and districts) seems to be a cause of such limited development. As Pépin (1986) observed, principals have few meetings with other colleagues; only 0.07% of their communications involve peers and 1.05% involve superiors. Moreover, the bureaucratic system puts them in a situation where they are unable to receive the support and feedback needed from peers (Garber, 1991; Smith & Scott, 1990). Briefly, principals are therefore working in isolation from their peer managers and superiors. Principalship seems to be a lonely job (Anderson, 1989; Barnett, 1990; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982; Laurin, 1989; Lee, 1993). According to Anderson (1989), Barnett (1990), Chandler (1983), Rosenholtz (1985) and Smith and Scott (1990) professional isolation can produce negative effects on people who have to deal with it. But to our knowledge, there is no quantitative study that directly addresses the problem of professional isolation of school principals. Thus the study explores the relationship between principals' professional isolation and their performance at work.

The cognitive approach to loneliness (Peplau, Miceli & Morasch, 1982; Peplau & Perlman, 1982, Perlman & Peplau, 1981) constitutes the theoretical framework of the study. It is the approach most frequently used in research on the topic of loneliness. According to that approach, loneliness at work and professional isolation are alike in meaning. Based on the definition of loneliness proposed by Perlman and Peplau (1981), professional isolation can be defined as the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations at work is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

Even though the theoretical framework does not directly answer the question about the link between professional isolation and performance at work, the relations observed between isolation and variables like depression (Rich & Scovel, 1987; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982), alcoholism (Calicchia & Barresi, 1975) and health problems (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982) suggest a negative relation between those two variables. No study tries to link professional isolation and performance at work. The studies identified investigate the relationship between loneliness and academic performance of college and university students. Two of them obtain a positive and non-significant relation between loneliness and academic performance (Burleson & Samter, 1992; Hawken, Duran & Kelly, 1991) and one obtains a positive and significant correlation with drop out (Rotenberg & Morrison, 1993). Moreover, two studies show a negative significant correlation between loneliness and academic performance (Dobson, Campbell & Dobson, 1987; Ponzetti & Cate, 1981) and another obtains similar but non-significant results (Booth, 1983). Results from these studies with students combined with effects observed by other studies suggest that we should expect a negative correlation between professional isolation of principals and their performance at work.

Method

A postal survey was used to test the hypothesis. Questionnaires were sent to the entire population of principals ($N = 166$) of a suburban area of the province of Quebec, Canada. The study obtained a response rate of 70.48 %. A preliminary analysis of the returned questionnaires reduced the size of the sample to 114 (27

women, 84 men and three persons of an unknown gender). Their ages range from 34 to 57 years, with a mean age of 47.99. They have an average of 12.91 years of experience as school administrators.

Professional isolation is the predictive variable of the study. It is defined in an operational manner as the score at the *Échelle de Solitude de l'Université Laval* (ÉSUL) (De Grâce, Joshi & Pelletier, 1993), which is a French version of the *Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale* (Russell, Peplau & Cotrona, 1980). The scale is composed of 20 statements such as "I feel in tune with people around me" and "I can find companionship when I want". The statement "At work" was placed at the top of the first item. Subjects judge on 4-point scales the extent to which the statements are accurate descriptions of themselves at work. The psychometric properties of the ÉSUL are similar to those of the *Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale*. For example, coefficient alphas have been found to range from .87 to .91 for the translation compared to .94 for the original version. Furthermore, the test-retest correlation of .85 over a period of eight weeks is superior to the one obtained in the original version ($r = .73$) (De Grâce et al., 1993). The internal consistency of the results produced by the scale in the study was high (coefficient alpha of .91).

The criterion variable is the performance at work, which is assessed by a French Canadian adaptation of the *Self-Appraisal Instrument For Community College Administrators* (Brown & Rodriguez, 1989). This self-evaluation instrument is composed of 34 performance dimensions. For each dimension, the questionnaire presents five performance levels from which the principal must select the description that best fits his performance. The levels are graduated

such a way that the mid-point on the continuum represents an acceptable performance. The translated version of the questionnaire has adequate internal consistency (coefficient alpha of .88) and test-retest reliability ($r = .84$).

The theoretical framework leads us to control moderator variables that are causal attributions. They are estimated by a French Canadian translation of the *Causal Dimension Scale* (Russell, 1982). This scale contains nine items, three of which are pertinent to each of the causal dimensions (causality, stability and controllability).

Results

Table 1 presents the mean score for each scale. It shows that subjects have a mean loneliness score of 41.22 ($SD = 9.22$) and a mean performance score of 137.24 ($SD = 12.24$). It also demonstrates that principals of the study tend to perceive the cause of their loneliness as external, unstable and uncontrollable.

Table 1
Mean scores, Standard deviation, Minimum and Maximum scores at ÉSUL, Self-Appraisal of the Performance (SAP) and Causal Dimensions Scale (CDS)

Scale	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
ÉSUL*	114	41.22	9.22	26	66
SAP**	114	137.24	12.24	102	166
CDS***					
Causality	111	11.11	5.62	3	27
Stability	111	13	6.89	3	27
Controllability	111	13.96	5.84	3	27

* Scores range from 20 to 80

** Scores range from 34 to 170

*** Scores range from 3 to 27

As shown in Figure 1, there is a negative relationship between loneliness score and score on the performance questionnaire. This relationship is significant according to the correlation ($r = -.26$; $p = .006$) between these two variables. Moreover, linear regression results show that the variance of professional isolation explained 6.8% of the variance of performance at work ($\beta = -.34$; $p = .005$).

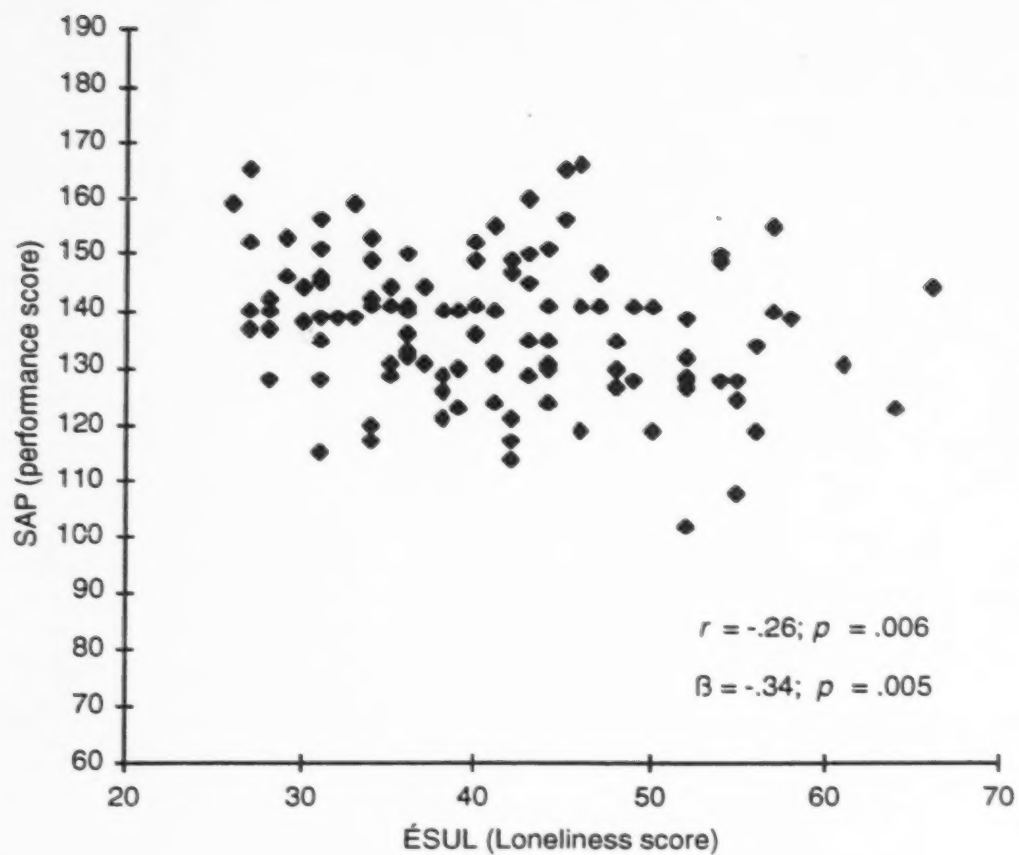


Figure 1. Relationship between ÉSUL score and SAP score.

Finally, t tests on regression coefficients, as proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), considering internality versus externality, stability versus instability and controllability versus incontrolability of the cause of professional isolation were performed. Results show no significant difference.

Discussion

Consistent with our expectations, principals' scores on the ÉSUL were negatively correlated with their scores on the self-appraisal questionnaire of performance (SAP). As suggested by Ponzetti and Cate (1981), results like those obtained in the study might be rooted in the relative inability of men to express their feelings to others. In fact, a large majority of the subjects in the study were men. Keeping these feelings to themselves can have negative effects including on their performance at work. Is it also possible, as proposed by Dobson et al. (1987), that a high level of isolation is so all-consuming that some principals are distracted from involvement and challenges at their schools? We can also argue that professional isolation generates dissatisfaction towards the working environment, which in turn produces the diminution of performance. In other respects, the correlation between professional isolation and performance can be the result of the lack of support, information and feedback brought about by the situation in which principals find themselves to accomplish their work. But confirming a causal relation, however, requires longitudinal research with multiple variables and path analysis.

This study is important in many ways. First, to our knowledge nobody has ever assessed the relationship between professional isolation of school principals and their performance at work. Second, usually studies that use the *Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale* (Russell et al., 1980) are interested in the loneliness of students or elderly people. By assessing professional isolation of principals, the study is innovative. It responds to the need for diversification exposed by Paloutzian and Janigian (1989). Finally, the study is also innovative through its assessment of

the moderator effect of causal attributions on the relation between professional isolation and performance.

At the educational level, by showing that professional isolation of principals is negatively related to their performance at work, the study calls for change in their work conditions of principals. To achieve this, researchers must try to identify the primary causes of principals' isolation. Finally, future studies must use multiple sources of information, contrary to our study which uses the same data source. They could also replicate the present study but with more subjects and more women to ensure that the results are representative.

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